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Translated from the Russian in English by Olga Shartse

**“If there is one single book on education which will make you weep, this is it.”**

**Duishen**  
*Chingiz Aitmatov*

I open my windows wide. A stream of fresh air comes pouring into the room. In the bluish paling half-light I pore over the sketches for my new picture. The sketches are many, for I have had to begin at the very beginning again and again. But it is too early to see the picture as a whole. I haven't found the main thing yet, that overpowering something that comes to you as suddenly and irresistibly as these early summer dawns growing clearer and clearer, and sounding a mysterious and elusive note in our soul. I pace the floor in the silence of the waning light, thinking, thinking, thinking... It happens every time. And every time I realize that my picture remains no more than a vague idea.

I do not believe in talking about my paintings before they are finished even to my closest friends. It isn't because I guard my work over jealously, but it's difficult to tell what a child, still in its cradle, will be like when it grows up. And it's just as difficult to judge an unfinished painting. However, I'm going to break my rule just this once because I want to announce for all to hear, or rather I want to share with people my thoughts on the yet unpainted picture.

This is no mere whim. I cannot act differently, because I feel that it is too big for me to handle along. The story that has gripped me, the story that prompted me to take up my brush seems so overwhelming that I simply cannot embrace it alone. I seem to be holding a brimming cup, and I am afraid of spilling it. That's why I want people to help me with their advice, to tell me what to do, to come and stand with me at my easel, if only in thought, and share my emotions.

Come closer, do not grudge me the warmth of your hearts, it is my duty to tell you this story...

Our Kurkureu village lies on a broad plateau at the foot of the mountains, with noisy little streams rushing down to it from the many gorges. Below the village spread the Yellow Valley, a huge Kazakh steppe, hinged with the spurs of the Black Mountains and the dark line of the railway running away to the horizon, to the west, across the plain.

And on the hill behind the village there are two great poplars. I remember them since I remember myself. From whatever side you approach our Kurkureu, the first thing you see are the two poplars, standing on that hill like beacons for all to see. I can't clearly explain my feeling-- perhaps it's because the memories of childhood are particularly precious, or maybe it has something to do with my being a professional artist--but anyway, every time I leave the train and start driving homeward across the plain, I stare my eyes out while still a long way off to see if my dear poplars are there safe and sound. Tall though they are, I could hardly expect to see them from that distance, but to me they are always visible and tangible.

The many times I drove back to Kurkureu from faraway places, I always had that nostalgic feeling: "Will I see my twin poplars soon? Will I ever reach home? All I want is to go up that hill and stand under the trees for a long, long time, listening to the murmur of their leaves."

Later, many years later, I discovered the secret of the poplars. They Stand on a rise, open to all winds, the slightest motion of the air affects them, and their every leaf responds sensitively to the tiniest breeze.

The discovery of this simple truth did not disappoint me in the least, nor did it rob me of my childish attitude towards them, which I retain to this day. And to this day I think of those two poplars on the hill as wonderful, living things. There, at their foot, I left my childhood, like a broken piece of green magic glass...

On the last day of school before our summer holidays began, a crowd of us would go there to rifle birds' nests, racing up the hill with whoops and yells. And the giants, swaying from side to side, seemed to be murmuring an invitation for us to come into their cool shade. But we, a bunch of barefooted scamps, would scramble up into the branches and raise havoc in the birds' kingdom. The birds would take wing and wheel above our heads with loud cries. But we didn't care. What was it to us? We climbed higher and higher--let's see who's the nimblest and bravest! And then suddenly, as if by magic, we'd see a beautiful world of space and light unfolding before us. The grandeur of that world was staggering. With bated breath we'd gaze down, spellbound and motionless, each on his own branch, and forget all about our nest-rifling plans. The collective farm stables, which we had always thought the biggest building in the world, appeared no grander than an ordinary woodshed. And beyond the village stretched the virgin steppe, floating, it seemed, in a shimmering haze. Peering into the bluish distance we would see more land whose existence we never suspected and rivers we knew nothing about, glimmering silver threads in the distance. And clinging to our branches we would wonder: is that the end of the earth, or is there a sky like ours, are there clouds, steppes and rivers like ours beyond that too? We would listen to the haunting music of the winds, and the leaves all whispering together would speak of the enchantment of those mysterious lands hidden behind the bluish haze.

I would listen to the swish of the leaves, my heart hammering from fear and excitement as I tried to picture those distant lands. I remember now that it never occurred to me to wonder who planted those poplars. What did that unknown person dream about, what did he say when he placed the roots of the young trees into the soil, with what hopes did he tend them and watch them grow?

For some unknown reason, our villagers have always called the hill where the poplars stand "Duishen's school." I remember hearing a man who was looking for his horse asks a passer-by: "I say, you haven't seen my bay hereabouts, have you?" And the answer: There were some horses grazing up there near Duishen's school last night. Maybe your bay's there too." We kids also called the hill Duishen's school, giving the name no thought, simply imitating the grown-ups. "Come on, let's go to Duishen's school and give the sparrows a good scare," someone would say.

Once upon a time there was a school on this hill, people said. No trace of it was left that I ever saw. As a child I went looking for some signs of the building, but though I searched and searched I never found anything. Later, it did strike me as strange that a bare hill should be called "Duishen's school", and one day I asked our old men who Duishen had been. One of them answered with a careless shrug: "Duishen? Why, he lives here now, he's Duishen of the Limping Sheep clan. It was all a long time ago; Duishen was a Komsomol member then. There was a tumbledown shed on that hill, and Duishen started a school in it. He taught children, he did. Some school that was, it was not worth the name! Ah

yes, those were queer times! In those days it was catch a horse by the mane and put your foot in the stirrup, and then you were your own boss. That's what Duishen did. He had a crazy idea and carried it through. And now there's not a broken stone left of that school shed, but the name stuck, and that's all the good it has done us."

I hardly knew Duishen at all, I remember him as an elderly man, tall and angular, with beetling brows. His house was on the other side of the river. He was the collective farm's *mirab* (the man who regulates the flow of water in irrigation ditches), and spent all his waking hours in the fields. Occasionally, he'd ride down our street, a big hoe tied to his saddle, and his horse was like its master-bony and slim of leg. Years later, I remember someone mentioning that Duishen was now the village postman. But that's all by the way. In those days my idea of a Komsomol member was a young man, quick to act and speak, a wonderful worker and the bravest *djigit* in the village, who'd stand up at a meeting and speak his mind, or write to the newspaper about loafers and thieves. And I simply could not imagine this docile, bearded old man as a Komsomol member and, more amazing still, teaching school when he himself could hardly read and write. I just couldn't see it, that's all. To be quite honest, I was sure it was one of those many tall stories circulating in our village. However, I was wrong...

Last autumn I received a telegram from my home village. It was an invitation to the opening ceremony of the new school built by the collective farmers with their own hands. I immediately made up my mind to go; how could I miss a great day like that in our village? I arrived a few days early, because I wanted to walk about and make some new drawings of my native district. Academician Sulaimanova had also been invited, I was told. She was expected to spend a couple of days in the village and then go on to Moscow.

I knew that this celebrated woman had left our village when she was no more than a child. I met her when I too, became a townsman. She was already past middle age, a statuesque woman with plenty of gray in her glossy black hair. She headed a chair at the university, lectured on philosophy, worked at the Academy and often went abroad. Academician Sulaimanova was a very busy woman and so I was not able to get to know her well, but whenever we met she invariably asked me for news of our home village, and never failed to say something, even if only a few words, about my new paintings. One day I worked up enough courage to say to her:

"Altynai Sulaimanova, why do you never go back home for a stay? They're so proud of you there, they know all about you but more from hearsay, and the village folk grumble sometimes that you don't want to know them, seeing that you've never honored your native Kurkureu with a visit."

"Yes, of course, I must go there one day," she answered with a wistful smile. "I've been dreaming of seeing Kurkureu for a long time, I haven't been there for ages. True, I have no relatives in the village. But that doesn't matter. I'll go there soon, I'm really homesick."

... She arrived when the ceremony was about to begin. The people gathered in the new school building saw her drive up, and all poured out of doors. Friends and strangers, the old and the young, they all wanted to shake her hand. I don't suppose Altynai expected such a welcome and I thought it rather embarrassed her. Hands pressed to her breast, she bowed right and left as she made her way through the crowd to the presidium table on the stage.

Altynai must have attended a great number of meetings and ceremonies in her life, and the welcome accorded her must always have been cordial and warm, but the welcome she was given here, in the village school, was so moving that it brought tears to her eyes.

After the speeches, the school's Young Pioneers presented her with a bouquet and a red Young Pioneer tie, and then asked her to make the first entry in the visitor's book. A children's amateur show followed, it was most entertaining, and after that the headmaster invited everyone to his place.

Hosts and guests alike couldn't make enough of Altynai. They gave her the place of honor, where the rugs were the most gorgeous, they lavished attention on her to show how much they respected and admired her. It was noisy and jolly, as such gatherings usually are, with everyone talking animatedly and proposing toasts.

A young village lad came in and handed the master of the house a batch of telegrams. They were from the village school's old pupils congratulating the collective farmers on the new building. The telegrams were passed around.

"I say, did old Duishen bring these telegrams?" the headmaster asked the lad.

"Yes. He says he whipped his horse all the way to get here before the meeting closed, so the telegrams could be read out for all to hear. He was a bit late, our aksakal, and he's terribly put out."

"But why is he outside? Tell him to come in."

The young lad went out to call Duishen. Altynai, who was sitting next to me, started nervously as though suddenly remembering something, and asked me what Duishen they were talking about. I thought her manner and tone were very strange.

"He's the postman. D'you know old Duishen?"

She nodded vaguely, got up to leave the table, but at that very moment someone rode past the window with a clatter of hoofs, and the young lad came back to say that Duishen had gone.

"He wouldn't come in, he has more mail to deliver, he says."

"Let him go and deliver it then, why hold him back? He can come and sit with the old men later," a voice said rather ungraciously.

"Oh, you don't know our Duishen! Duty comes first with him. He'll never stop anywhere before he's finished his job."

"Yes, he's a queer character. After the war he came out of hospital, in the Ukraine it was, and stayed there. He's only been back about five years; he says he wants to die at home. That man never married in his life..."

"It's a pity he wouldn't come in though. Oh well, never mind," the host said.

"Comrades, some of you may remember that once we all went to Duishen's school" said one of the most respected men in the village, raising his glass. "But I'm sure he did not know all the letters of the alphabet himself." The man screwed up his face comically and shook his head. There was both amazement and sarcasm in his expression.

“It's true enough,” several voices said at once.

There was general laughter.

“It certainly is! What didn't Duishen attempt to do in those days! And we were fine ones too--we seriously regarded him as a teacher!”

When the laughter died down, the speaker raised his glass again.

“Look how people have grown in our day! Altynai Sulaimanovna is an academician, known throughout the country. Practically all of us have a secondary education, and many a higher education. Today we have opened a new secondary school in our village, and that alone shows how greatly our life has changed. May the sons and daughters of Kurkureu always be among the best-educated people of their day! Let us drink to this.”

The party became noisy and jolly again as everyone drank the toast. Altynai alone appeared disturbed and ill at ease, and took no more than a sip of her wine. No one noticed it though everyone was in high spirits, talking and laughing.

Altynai glanced at her wristwatch again and again. And afterwards, when the whole party came out for a breath of fresh air, I saw her standing apart from the rest, her intent gaze on the hill where the yellowed poplars were swaying gently in the breeze. The sun was sinking where the sky met the blurred lilac line of the steppe. Its waning light stained the crowns of the poplars a dull, sorrowful purple.

I went up to Altynai.

“They are shedding their leaves now, but you ought to see them in spring when they are bursting info leaf!”

“I've been thinking of it too.” she said with a sigh, and after a pause added, as if speaking to herself: “Yes, all living things have their spring and their autumn.”

Her aging face looked pensive and sad. She was gazing at the poplars with a very feminine sort of regret. The academician had vanished; this was just an ordinary, unsophisticated Kirghiz woman, guileless in both sorrow and joy. She seemed to be lost in memories of her youth, which, as our songs say, cannot be called back even if you call from the tallest mountain. I believe she wanted to tell me something as she stood gazing at the poplars, but changing her mind she hastily put on the spectacles she was holding in her hand.

“I believe the Moscow train goes through at eleven, doesn't it?” she asked.

“It does.”

“Then it's time I started for the station.”

“But why so suddenly?” I asked.

“You promised you'd stay here a few days, you know. People won't let you go so soon.”

"I've urgent business in Moscow. I've got to leave at once."

Her mind was made up, and no plea could move her.

It was getting dark. The disappointed villagers saw their guest to the car and made her promise she'd come for a longer stay soon, for a week at the very least. I drove with her to the station.

Why the sudden hurry I wondered. It was foolish to hurt her countrymen's feelings, and especially on a great day like this. I wanted to ask why she was doing it, but I did not dare. Not because I was afraid to appear tactless. I just knew it would be no use that she wouldn't tell me anything. She was lost in thought, and never said a word all the way to the station.

"I can see that something has upset you. Could we have offended you in any way? Are you angry with anyone?" I brought myself to ask her.

"Oh, no, heavens no! The very idea! Who could I be angry with? Only myself, perhaps. Yes, I could really be angry with myself."

And with that she left. A few days after my return to town I got a letter from her, which surprised me. Altynai wrote to say that she was going to stay in Moscow longer than planned and then went on:

"Although I have so many important and urgent things to attend to in Moscow, I have decided to put them all off in order to write you this long letter. If you should find my story interesting I'd very much ask you to think it over and suggest how it could be published. I think this ought to be done not just for the benefit of our villagers, but also for the benefit of all, our youth especially. I gave the matter much thought before arriving at this decision. This is my confession to people. I owe it to them. The greater the number of people who read it, the easier my conscience will be. Do not be afraid of making it embarrassing for me. Do not hold anything back."

For days I could think of nothing else, so haunting was the impression produced by her letter. The best thing to do, I finally decided, was to relate the story as if told by Altynai herself.

It happened in 1924. Yes, that was the year... What is now our collective farm was in those days a small village of poor peasants. I was fourteen at the time, and I lived in the home of my late father's cousin. My mother, too, was dead.

That autumn, after the wealthier sheep-farmers had moved up into the mountains for the winter, a stranger wearing an army greatcoat came to our village. I remember the greatcoat because it was a black one, oddly enough. The appearance of a man in uniform in our remote little village, wedged in between the mountains, caused quite a stir.

At first people said that he'd been a commander in the army and so he'd be a high official in the village too, but later it turned out that he was no commander at all, he was the son of Tashtanbek, that same Tashtanbek who had left the village to work on the railway that hungry winter years ago and was never heard of again. And this stranger was his son Duishen, sent here, so he said, to start a school and teach children to read and write.

In those days, schools were unheard of in our parts, and people did not understand such newfangled notions very well. Some believed the rumors; others dismissed them for old women's gossip. Perhaps they would have forgotten all about this school business, if a general meeting had not been called soon after Duishen's arrival. My uncle grumbled, reluctant to go.

"Meeting, indeed! They're always bothering you with their nonsense when you're busy!" But finally he saddled his old Mg and rode to the meeting in style, as befitted a self-respecting *djigit*. The neighbors' kids and I followed him at a run.

When, panting, we got to the hillock where our meetings were usually held, we saw the pale-faced young man in the black army greatcoat addressing the riders and those who came on foot. We couldn't catch his words, so we edged closer. A very old man in a badly worn fur coat suddenly interrupted him.

"Listen, son, it was the mullahs who taught children before, but your father's well known to all of us, he was a pauper like the rest," the old man said in a rush of words. "What we'd like to know is this: how come that you're a mullah then?"

"I'm not a mullah aksakal, I'm a member of the Komsomol," Duishen answered readily. "It's teachers and not mullahs who'll be teaching children now. I learned to read and write in the army, and I had a bit of schooling before then too. That's how much of a mullah I am."

"Well, that's different...."

There were shouts of approval.

"And the Komsomol has sent me here to teach your children. We'll need some sort of place. I'm thinking of opening the school--with your help, of course--in that old stable on the hill. D'you think it's a good idea?"

The men were not prepared to answer right away. They were not quite sure what this newcomer was after. Satymkul, who was notoriously contrary, broke the silence. He had been listening attentively to the talk going on around him as he sat leaning forward on the pommel, nonchalantly spitting through his teeth now and then.

"Not so fast, young fellow," he said, squinting at Duishen as if taking aim. "You'd better tell us this: what do we want a school for?"

"What do you want a school for?" Duishen repeated, too stunned to answer.

"Yes, that's right. What for?" someone called out. Everyone began to talk and shout at once.

"Tilling the soil has been our life since time out of mind. Our hoe will always keep us in food. Our children will live the same way, so what the devil do they want learning for? It's the officials who need learning and we're just simple folk. So don't you try getting us all mixed up!"

Gradually the excitement died down

"Surely you can't be against your children going to school?"

Duishen asked in a shocked voice, peering into the faces about him.

“Supposing we are, are you going to use force? Those times are past. We're a free people now, we'll live any way we like.”

Duishen turned deathly pale. With shaking fingers he tore at the hooks on his coat, fumbled in the great pocket of his tunic, got out a piece of paper folded in four, hastily shook it out and held it high above his head.

“So you're against this paper which says that children must go to school, which has the seal of the Soviet Government on it? Who gave you land and water? Who gave you freedom? All right, who's against the laws of the Soviet Government? Speak up. Answer!”

He shouted the word “answer” with such resounding, angry force that it pierced the mellow autumn silence like a bullet, and the shot was echoed crisply in the mountains. No one said a word. People stood with heads hung low, in silence.

“We're poor peasants,” Duishen now said quietly. “We were humiliated and kicked about all our lives. We lived in darkness. And now the Soviet Government wants us to see the light, it wants us to learn to read and write. That's what our children want a school for.”

Duishen fell silent and waited. The old man in the badly worn fur coat was the first to speak.

“All right, teach them if you want to, we don't care...”

“But I'm asking you to help me. That stable on the hill wants repairing, a bridge has to be built across the stream, we'll need firewood for the winter...”

“Not so fast, *djigit*, not so fast” Satymkul broke in rudely. He spat through his teeth and fixed a malevolent look on Duishen, screwing up one eye. “Here you are shouting for all the village to hear that you're going to start a school. But from what I can see you've neither a fur coat on your back, nor a horse to ride, no land, not a patch tilled and sown, and not a single sheep to your name! How do you expect to live, my good man? By stealing the herds of others, perhaps?”

“I'll get along. I'll be getting a salary.”

“All that's talking!” Satymkul, highly pleased with himself, straightened up in his saddle and looked about him triumphantly. “Everything's dear now. You can do your own worrying then, *djigit*, and you can teach the children for the salary you're getting. The state has money enough, just leave us in peace, we've cares enough as it is.”

Saying this, Satymkul turned his horse about and rode away. The others started off after him. Duishen remained standing there all alone, holding the paper in his hands, looking lost and miserable.

I felt sorry for him, and stood staring with dumb sympathy until my uncle chased me away.

“What are you doing here, you uncombed brat? What are you gaping at? Go home at once!” I raced after my friends. ‘Kids coming to meetings, what next!’ My uncle grumbled.

Next morning, when we girls went to fetch water from the stream, we saw Duishen wading across to the other side. He carried a shovel, a hoe, an axe and an old pail.

Every morning after that, the villagers saw Duishen's black-clad solitary figure trudging uphill to the abandoned stable. And it was not until late in the evening that he came down to the village again. Often he would be seen carrying a huge bundle or dry thistles of straw on his back. Men sighting him from afar would raise themselves up on their stirrups and, shielding their eyes with a hand, exchange remarks about him.

"I say, isn't that Duishen the teacher over there with the load on his back?" "None other"

"The poor chap. A teacher's job doesn't look too easy either"

"Did you think it was? Look at the bundle he's lugging, he's no better than a bey's servant women."

"And to hear him talk he's so high and mighty."

"That's simply because he has that paper with the seal. There's power in that seal."

One day, carrying bagfuls of dry cow dung for fuel, which we usually gathered at the foot of the mountain behind the village, we decided to go and see what the teacher was doing in the old stable. This mud building had once belonged to the bey. He kept his mares there, which had foaled in the winter. Then Soviet power was established, the bey went away, abandoning his property. Nobody even went there and the place was overgrown with burdock. But now we saw that the burdock had all been rooted out and stacked in a pile, and the yard had been cleaned. The crumbling, rain-damaged walls had been plastered with clay, and the warped door that had always sagged on one hinge had been fixed and was properly closed now.

We dropped our bags on the ground to rest a bit, and at that moment Duishen came out. He was spattered all over with clay and looked startled at first, but then he smiled at us.

"Where do you come from girls?" he asked, wiping the sweat off his face.

We were squatting on the ground beside our bags, too embarrassed to speak. Duishen, realizing that shyness was making us tongue-tied, tried to put us at our ease with a friendly wink and smile.

"Those bags are bigger than yourselves," he said. I'm very glad you came because, after all, it's your school, you know. It's almost ready for you. I've just finished building a stove of sorts, and there's the chimney, see? Ah I have to do now is get in a supply of fuel for the winter, but that'll be easy, there's plenty of thistles growing all around. We'll put lots of straw on the floor to sit on and start lessons. Do you think you'll like going to school?"

I was older than the others, and so I felt it was up to me to answer.

"I'll go if my aunt lets me."

"Why shouldn't she, of course she'll let you, why not? What's your name?"

"Altynai--its a good name. And you're a good girl. I'm sure, eh?" He smiled so pleasantly it warmed your heart. "Who's your father?"

I kept silent: I did not like admitting that I was an orphan, and I did not like to be pitied.

"She's an orphan," another girl volunteered. "She lives with her uncle."

"Well, Altynai," Duishen said to me with a smile, "come yourself and bring the other children to school. Agree?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Call me teacher. Would you like to see inside? Come in, don't be shy."

"No, we'll be going, it's time we went home," we said, really too timid to go in.

"Run along then. You'll see it later when you start lessons. I think I'll make another trip for grass before it gets dark.

Duishen took a length of rope and a sickle and started off. We got to our feet, hoisted the bags onto our backs, and trotted back to the village. Suddenly, I had a bright idea.

"Wait, girls," I said. "Let's empty our bags in the school-yard that'll make a bit more fuel for the winter."

"And go home empty-handed? Clever, aren't you".

"We'll come back and gather more."

"No, thanks. Mother will scold me if I'm home late."

Without waiting for me, the girls hurried off.

I still don't know why I acted as I did that day. Perhaps it was sheer stubbornness, or an uncontrollable urge to rebel, having had all my impulses and desires crushed since infancy with cruel cuffs and scolding; an urge to do something good for this man, a total stranger really, for his smile which warmed my heart, for trusting me if only a little, for saying those few kind words. And I know it now, I know it without a doubt that my real life with all its joys and sufferings began that day; with the thing I did then. For that was the first time in my life I did something on my own decision, something I considered right, without hesitation or fear of punishment. Desereted by my friends, I hurried back to Duishen's school, emptied my bag beside the door, and ran as fast as I could through the ravines and glades to gather more cow dung.

I ran heedlessly as if on wings, my heart beating happily as if I had just performed some wonderful feat. The sun seemed to know why I was so happy. Yes, I do believe that it knew why I was running with such light-hearted abandon: because I had done a good deed.

The sun had already sunk to the hilltops, but I thought it was reluctant to disappear; it wanted to go on watching me. It made my way beautifully coloring the shriveled, yellowing grass and leaves a generous

crimson, rose and purple. The tassels of the dry feather grass were like a flickering flame as they flashed past. The metal buttons on my patched and mended *beshmet* blazed in the sun. On and on I ran, my heart jubilantly singing to the land, the sky, and the wind: "Look at me! See how proud I am? I'm going to study, I shall go to school and bring others there!"

I don't know how long I ran, but suddenly I came to earth with a jolt: cow dung. It was the strangest thing, so many cows grazed here in the summer, there was always plenty of dry dung, and now it had all vanished. Maybe I wasn't really looking for it? The farther a field I ran the less I found. "At this rate I'll never fill my bag before dark," I thought in a panic, dashing about. Still my bag was only half-full. Meanwhile the sunset glow had dimmed, and darkness was quickly flooding the glens.

Never before had I stayed out so late alone. Night spread its somber wing over the silent, desolate hills. Frightened out of my wits, I slung the bag on my shoulder and flew to the village. It was so creepy I wanted to scream and sob, but, strangely, the thought of Duishen made me stifle my cries. I controlled myself with an effort never taking a backward glance to see what furies were pursuing me.

I reached home out of breath, dripping with sweat and covered with dust. Panting, I stumbled into the house. My aunt, who was sitting in front of the fire, got up and advanced on me with an ominous scowl. She was a mean, cruel woman.

"Why so late?" She demanded, and before I could speak, snatched the bag from me and flung it away. "Is this all you could find in a whole day?"

My friends had sneaked, as I found out afterwards.

"You black-faced slut! What did you want in that school anyway? Why couldn't you go and die out there?" She caught hold of my ear and hit me on the head again and again. "You dirty slut! No, a wolf cub will never make a house dog! Other people's children try to be a help at home, but not you, never! I'll teach you running to school, if I catch you going anywhere near it again I'll break your legs for you! I'll give you something to remember your school by!"

I said nothing; I only tried not to scream. Afterwards, squatting in front of the fire which I had to tend, I wept quietly, without a sound, as I stroked our gray cat which always seemed to know when I was in trouble and would jump into my lap to comfort me. I wasn't crying because my aunt had beaten me, I was used to that but because I knew she would never let me go to school.

Two days later, very early in the morning, dogs began to bark excitedly all over the village, and voices could be heard talking loudly. It was Duishen going from house to house collecting the children and taking them to school. We had no streets in those days, our gray mud huts were scattered about the village in disorder, everyone built where the fancy took him. Duishen, surrounded by a noisy crowd of children, was calling on one family after the next.

Our house was the end one. My aunt and I were grinding millet in a wooden mortar, and my uncle was busy digging up the wheat he kept in a hole beside the barn to take it to market. We brought the heavy pestles down in turns like proper blacksmiths, but I kept glancing at the road to see where Duishen was going. I was afraid he wouldn't come as far as our house. Though I knew my aunt wouldn't let me go to school, I wanted Duishen to come and see where I lived. In my heart I begged him not to turn back before he reached our place.

“Good morning, may God help you with your work! And if god doesn't, the whole crowd of us will, see how many we are?” Duishen greeted my aunt in this light vein.

She made a low, inarticulate sound in reply; my uncle did not even bother to give the teacher a look.

Duishen was not put out by this reception. He sat down on a log that lay in the middle of the yard, and got out pencil and paper.

“We're starting school today How old is your daughter?”

My aunt gave him no answer and pounded the millet with vicious fury. Obviously, she was not going to talk to him. I squirmed: what was going to happen now? Duishen glanced at me and smiled. And again my heart felt warmed.

“How old are you, Altynai?” he asked me.

I did not have the courage to reply.

“What's it to you, and who are you to ask anyway?” my aunt said peevishly.

“She has no time for school. Even girls who live with their fathers and mothers not sluts like her - even they don't learn reading and writing. You've got a crowd together, go ahead and head them to school, there's nothing for you here.”

“How can you say such a thing?” Duishen cried, jumping to his feet. “Is it her fault that she's an orphan? Is there a law, perhaps, forbidding orphans to learn?”

“I don't give a damn for your laws. I make my own laws here and I'll take no orders from you!”

“The same laws apply to all of us. You don't need this girl perhaps, but we do, the Soviet state does. If you go against us, we will make you take orders from us.”

“Why, look at the big shot, just look at him!” My aunt stood arms akimbo, all ready for battle. “Who's the brat to take orders from then? Who feeds and clothes her? Me or you, the son of a tramp and a homeless tramp yourself?”

There's no telling how it would have ended if my uncle had not appeared from the hole just then. He hated it when his wife meddled in things that were no business of hers, forgetting that she had a husband and master in the house. He sometimes gave her terrible beatings for this. And now, too, he saw red.

“Shut up, woman!” he roared, climbing out of the hole. “What makes you think you're the head of the family and can decide what's right? Try to jabber less and do more. And you, son of Tashtanbek, take the brat and teach her or roast her for dinner, whichever you like. Out of my yard with you! Get out!”

“So you'll let her go gadding about, and who's to help me in the house? Who, I ask you?” my aunt raised a howl, but Uncle shut her up at once with a harsh: “Shut that noise!”

Every dark cloud has a silver lining, they say, and that was how I first started going to school.

When we got there Duishen told us to sit on the floor strewn thickly with straw, and gave each of us a notebook, a pencil and a small board.

"Put the board on your knees and the notebook on it, it'll make writing easier," he explained.

Next, he pointed to the picture he had pinned to the wall. There was a Russian man on it.

"That's Lenin," he said.

I shall never forget that portrait. For some reason, I never came across it afterwards, and to myself I still call it "Duishen's" picture. Lenin was wearing a rather baggy army jacket, his face looked pinched and he had a longish beard. His wounded arm was in a sling, his cap pushed back on his head, and there was a calm look, in his keen eyes. Their soft, kind expression seemed to say to us: "Children, if only you knew what a beautiful future awaits you!" In that moment of silence, I fancied he was really thinking of my future.

Duishen must have had that picture for some time. It was printed on cheap paper used for posters, and it had become frayed on the edges and folds. There was nothing else on the walls of the schoolroom, just this picture of Lenin.

"I'll teach you to read and count. I'll show you how letters and numerals are written," Duishen told us.  
"I'll teach you all I know myself."

He really did teach us all he knew, and he was amazingly patient with us. He showed each one of us how to hold a pencil and readily explained unfamiliar words to us.

Thinking of it now I honestly marvel at him: how courageous of that all but illiterate young fellow, who could hardly read and had no textbooks, not even an elementary reader, to attempt that truly great job! It was no simple thing trying to teach children whose fathers and forefathers had all been illiterate. Duishen was, of course, completely innocent of grammar and had no idea of method. Rather, he never even suspected that such things existed.

He taught us as well as he could, he taught us what he thought we should know, guided by his instinct alone. But the sincere enthusiasm with which he tackled the job was not wasted on us, of that I am sure.

He accomplished more than he realized. Yes, he did, because in that school of his, in that old mud stable with gaping holes in the walls through which we could see the snow-clad mountaintops, we Kirghiz children, who had never left the confines of our village, suddenly glimpsed a new and wonderful world.

It was there we learnt that Moscow, the city where Lenin lived, was many, many times bigger than Aulie-Ata and even Tashkent, that there were very, very large seas in the world, the size of the Talass Valley, and that huge ships, as big as our mountains, sailed those seas. We learnt that kerosene, which people brought from market, came from the depths of the earth. We came firmly to believe that when our people became a little better off our school would move into a big white building with large windows, and the pupils would have desks.

As soon as we more or less mastered the alphabet we wrote our first word “Lenin”. Our political vocabulary comprised such concepts as “bey”, “hired laborer” and “Soviets”. Duishen promised to teach us to write the word “revolution” before the year was out.

Listening to Duishen, we felt we were fighting side by side with him against the white guards. His description of Lenin was so stirring; he might have seen him with his own eyes. Much of what he told us, I now realize, were legends woven by the people about our great leader, but we never doubted the truth of it, just as we never doubted that milk was white.

“Have you ever shaken hands with Lenin?” we asked him once.

“No, children, I have never seen Lenin,” he said, shaking his head regretfully, and sighing in embarrassment as if he had failed us.

At the end of every month Duishen went to the regional center to report on his work. He went on foot, and was usually away two or three days.

We missed him terribly. Had he been my big brother I couldn't have missed him more. Whenever my aunt wasn't looking, I'd slip to the back of the house and peer down the road. How I longed to see him coming down that road, to see his smile that warmed the heart, and hear his words that brought enlightenment!

I was the oldest of his pupils. Perhaps that was why I was the quickest to learn, though I don't think it was the only reason. Every word he spoke, every letter he taught me to write, were sacred for me. And there was nothing more important in life than grasping what he taught. I treasured the notebook he had given me, and I practiced my letters on the ground with the tip of the sickle, on the mud walls with a bit of charcoal, on the snow and in the dust with a twig. For me there was no one in the whole world more learned and wise than Duishen.

Winter was drawing close.

Until the first snow we used to wade across the little stream that rushed noisily along its pebbly bed at the foot of the hill. Finally it became too much for us, the icy water stung our legs so. It was hardest on the smaller children, tears started to their eyes every time. Duishen now carried them across, taking two at a time; one piggyback, and the other in his arms. It all seems unbelievable to me now. People laughed at Duishen, either because they were ignorant or stupid. The wealthy men who spent the winter up in the mountains and only came down to the flourmill occasionally were especially noxious. Riding past on their sleek hot horses, decked out in their red-fox hats and sheepskin coats, they would stare at Duishen carrying the children across. They'd laugh and point, and say something like: “Dammit, why hadn't I seen him before, he'd have done wonderfully for a second wife!”

Roaring with laughter, and spattering us with water and mud they'd ride on their way.

Oh, how I wanted to run after those stupid men, catch their horses by the bridles and scream into their smug, jeering faces: “How dare you say such things about our teacher? You're stupid, wicked people!”

But would anyone care what a girl said? So I would just stand, gulping down my bitter tears. Duishen pretended not to hear, he ignored their insulting remarks completely. What's more, he would quickly think of some funny story to make us laugh and forget the incident.

Hard though he tried, Duishen could not get any timber to build a bridge across the stream. One day after school, when he had carried all the children across, he and I stayed behind to make a crossing of turf and stones.

It would have been a matter of half an hour at most for our villagers to get together and build a bridge for their children; two or three trees thrown across the stream would have done the job. But in those days our people were too ignorant to take the school seriously, they thought Duishen a crank, at best, to mess around with kids. If you want to teach them, go ahead, if you don't, just send them packing! Such was their attitude. The men themselves had horses to ride, and so they needed neither bridges nor crossings. But, of course, they should have stopped to consider why this young fellow, who was as good as they were in every way, took the trouble to teach their children, doing it with such amazing staunchness, such extraordinary persistence, undaunted by difficulties, hardships, sneers and insults.

There was snow on the ground the day we built the stepping-stones, and the water was so cold it took your breath away. How Duishen stood it I don't know--he was barefooted and he worked without a pause. It was torture to step on the bottom that felt as if it were strewn with red-hot coals. I was halfway across, when suddenly I got cramp in both legs. Bent over double with pain, I could neither call out nor straighten up as I slumped lower and lower in the water. Duishen rushed over, picked me up in his arms, carried me to the bank, and spread his greatcoat on the ground for me to sit on. He rubbed my blue, numb legs, massaged my frozen hands and breathed on them.

"Wrap yourself into my coat and sit here awhile, Altynai," he said with tender concern "I'll manage by myself."

At last the crossing was made. Duishen came out of the water and as he pulled on his boots he looked at me, huddled in his coat, and smiled.

"Warmer now, my good helper? Here, wrap yourself in properly," he said, and after a short pause asked: "Was it you who left the fuel at the door that day, Altynai?"

"Yes," I replied.

A tiny smile touched the corners of his lips as if he was saying to himself: I thought so."

I remember the blood rushing to my face because he knew, because he had not forgotten that incident, trifling though it was. I was happy, I was in the seventh heaven, and Duishen understood.

"My clear little spring," he said, his eyes caressing me. Such a clever child, too..., if only I could send you to school in town! What a person you'd grow up to be!"

He turned away abruptly, and took a step to the bank.

I can see him now, standing on the bank of that noisy stream, his hands behind his head, his shining eyes following the white clouds chased by the wind high above the mountains.

What was he thinking about in those minutes? Of sending me to school in town? And I, huddling in his overcoat, was thinking: "How I wish he was my brother! I'd rush into his arms, hug him hard, close my eyes tight and whisper the most loving endearments into his ear. Oh Lord, make him my big brother!"

I suppose we all adored our teacher for his kindness, his goodness, for his dreams about our future. I think we appreciated all that, young though we were. Why else did we make that long tramp to school every day, gasping in the wind as we climbed the steep hill, wading through the deep snow? We went to school of our own free will. No one forced us to go and freeze in that icy barn. It was so cold there that rime formed from our breathing on faces, hands and clothes. We took turns warming ourselves near the stove, while the rest sat still and listened to Duishen.

On one of those chilly mornings—it was the end of January—Duishen came to fetch us as usual. He was silent and forbidding, his eagle's brews were drawn, and his face was dark and hard as though forged from black rolled iron. Never had we seen our teacher like this. We sensed that something was wrong and followed him, a subdued little crowd.

Usually, if the snowdrifts on the road were high, Duishen went first, with me following, and the rest of the children coming single file after me. That day, too, he went ahead, for during the night a large snow bank had formed at the foot of the hill. Sometimes, you can tell a person's mood by watching him from behind. That's how it was then: we knew at once that our teacher was crushed and bowed with grief. His head hung low, he could hardly drag his feet. I can still see that sinister pattern of black and white: as we climbed the hill, before me there was Duishen's black-clad hunched back, higher up on the hill humped the white snow-drifts like reclining camels with the wind sweeping the whirling snow dust off their backs, and higher up still, in the dull white sky, hung a solitary black cloud.

When we came into our classroom and sat down on the straw, Duishen did not go and light the stove at once as he usually did.

“Get up,” he ordered us.

We did.

“Bare your heads.” Obediently we took off our caps, and he took off his peaked cap, too. We did not know what it meant. And then he told us in a breaking, husky voice:

“Lenin is dead. People the world over are mourning him. And you, too, must stand where you are and not talk. Look at his picture. Remember this day.”

Our schoolroom became so quiet as if it lay buried under snow. We could hear the wind blowing in through the chinks in the walls. We could hear the straw rustling as the snowflakes fell on it.

That mournful hour when bustling towns became mute, when factories whose clamor shook the earth grew still, when rumbling trains paused on the tracks, when the whole world grieved in silence, we too, a particle of a part of the people, stood in solemn silence with our teacher in that icy barn called school, and took farewell of Lenin, believing in our hearts that none could be closer to him and none more bereft. And there was our own Lenin in his baggy jacket, and his arm in a sling, looking at us from the wall as before. And as before he seemed to speak to us, saying with his clear, trusting eyes: “Children, if only you knew what a future awaits you!” And I fancied, in those silent moments, that he really was thinking of my future.

And then Duishen brushed his tears away with a sleeve and said:

“I have to go to the regional center. I am joining the Party. I’ll be back in three days.”

Those three days were the grimmest winter days I have even known. It was as if some mighty forces of nature were trying to fill in the void in the world caused by the departure of the great man. The wind howled in the gullies ceaselessly, snowstorms raged, and the frost rang with a metallic ring... The elements would not be calmed; the wind whirled the snow in mad despair and, sobbing, pounded the earth...

Our village crouched silently at the foot of the mountains, which loomed in a blade blur through the dark low-hanging clouds. Thin plumes of smoke rose from the chimneys. People kept indoors. To make things worse, wolves became a menace. They appeared on the roads in the daytime, at night prowled close to the village, and their hungry, blood-chilling howls could be heard till sunrise.

I was worried about our teacher, it was so terribly cold and he had no fur coat nothing but his army coat. The day he was due back, I became quite distracted. I must have had a premonition of disaster. I kept slipping out of the house to peer into the desolate, snow-swept steppe hoping to see him coming along the road. But there was never a soul in sight.

“Oh teacher, where are you? I implore you, don’t stay away any longer, hurry back! We miss you, teacher, can you hear me? We miss you!”

But the steppe remained indifferent to my soundless cry, and I wept, I don’t know why.

My running in and out annoyed my aunt.

“Leave that door alone! Sit down and do your spinning. You’ll be the death of the children, freezing the house out! Just you try going out again!” she shouted at me, shaking a fist, and did not let me out again.

It was already growing dark and I did not know if Duishen was back or not. This uncertainty drove me frantic. One minute I’d tell myself that he was back safely because he never once failed to return on the day he promised. But the next, my imagination would run away with me again: he was unwell, his walk was slow and difficult, he’d lose his way in the steppe if a snowstorm started up. I could not concentrate on my work, my fingers were all thumbs the yarn kept breaking off, and this maddened my aunt still more.

“What’s wrong with you today? Are your hands made of wood or what?” She glared at me, her anger mounting. At last her patience snapped, and she cried in exasperation: “Lord, why doesn’t the plague take you! Here, take this bag to grandmother Saikal, it’s hers.”

I almost jumped for joy. It was with grandmother Saikal that Duishen roomed. The old couple, Saikal and Kartanbai, were distant relatives of mine on my mother’s side. At one time I used to go and see them very often, and sometimes I stayed with them overnight. Perhaps my aunt remembered this, or may be God prompted her to send me there.

“I’m as sick of the sight of you as people are of oat flour in a year of dearth. If they’ll let you, stay the night there. Go on, and don’t let me see you again too soon!”

I hurried out The wind was howling like a shaman; choking with rage, it would grow still for a moment, and then it would attack you again suddenly, flinging handfuls of stinging snow into your hot

face. Clutching the bag under my arm, I started at a run across the village to the other end, following the fresh tracks of a house's hoofs in the snow. One thought alone preyed on my mind: "Is he back?"

He wasn't. Gasping for breath, I rushed into the house, startling poor grandmother Saikal.

"What's up?" she cried in alarm. "Why did you run so fast, are you in trouble?"

"No, no, trouble. I've brought you back your bag. May I stay with you tonight?"

"Of course, my dear child. Oh, you naughty girl, how you frightened me! You haven't been to see us for a long time. Come, sit in front of the fire, you're frozen."

"Put some meat in the pot, old woman, give the child a treat. And Duishen must be coming home soon," said Kartanbai. He was sitting near the window, resoling his felt boots. "He ought to have been home long ago, but no need to worry, he'll come before nightfall. Our old nag's very spry when she's heading for home."

Slowly, night crept up to the windows. My heart stood on guard, it stopped beating every time a dog barked or a voice came from outside. Still, there was no sign of Duishen. I was glad grandmother Saikal was so talkative it made the waiting easier.

And so we sat up waiting for him. At midnight, Kartanbai decided to go to bed.

"Make the beds, old woman," he said. "He's not coming tonight. It's too late now. Officials are busy people; it's business that's keeping him. Otherwise he'd have been back hours ago." The old man settled down to sleep. A bed was made for me in the corner behind the stove. But I could not sleep. Kartanbai was coughing all the time, tossing and turning and muttering prayers.

"How's my poor old nag doing?" he whispered fretfully. "No one will give you a blade of straw free of charge, and oats you can't even buy for money."

He soon fell asleep, and now it was the wind that kept me awake. It groped about the roof, rustled the straw on the eaves and scraped against the windowpanes with its rough hand. I could hear it hurting the snow against the walls outside.

Kartanbai's confidence that all was well with Duishen did not put my mind at rest. I waited for him; all my thoughts were of him--a solitary figure braving the windswept snowy steppe. I must have dozed off, for suddenly I was jolted awake. A nasal, drawn-out howl seemed to rise from the ground and hang, vibrating, in the air. Wolves! And not one, but many. Calling to one another from different directions, they were converging. Their whines merged into one long, eerie howl that rose and fell together with the wind, now fading, now coming nearer again. At moments, the wolves seemed to be quite near, just outside the house.

"They're howling for a snowstorm," the old woman whispered.

Kartanbai did not say anything; he was listening hard to the sounds.

"No, there's something behind this. They're chasing someone. It's either a man or a horse they're closing in on. Hear them? I only hope it's not Duishen. He's not afraid of anything, the young fool." In

nervous haste, Kartanbai fumbled in the dark for his fur coat. “Light the lamp, old woman. Hurry, for God's sake!”

We were up at once, Saikal and I, shaking with fear. It took her a moment or two to find the lamp and light it. And suddenly the howling stopped, the sound broke off so abruptly as if it had never been.

“They've attacked, damn them!” Kartanbai cried out.

Picking up a crutch he rushed to the door, but at that precise moment his dogs began to bark, someone rushed past the windows and then started banging on the door.

A cloud of vapor tore into the room. When it dispersed we saw Duishen. He staggered in, panting, his face ashen, and slumped against the wall.

“Rifle,” he breathed out the word.

But we were too overwrought to understand. Everything went dark before my eyes, and as through a fog I heard the two old people intoning:

“Sacrifice the black sheep, sacrifice the white sheep! May the holy Baubedin keep you! Is it really you?”

“Rifle... give me a rifle!” Duishen repeated.

“We won't let you go, not while there's life left in us!” the old couple begged him. “You'll have to kill us first!”

My whole body went strangely limp, and I lay down without uttering a word.

“They overtook me on the very doorstep,” Duishen sighed noisily and threw his whip into a corner. “The mare was already winded, and then those wolves started chasing her, she made it to the village and collapsed. That's when they went at her.”

“Never mind the horse, you're alive and that's all that matters. If the mare hadn't dropped, they wouldn't have let you go either. Glory be to Baubedin the Guardian that it has ended like this. Take your things off now, and sit here in front of the fire. Let me pull your boots off for you,” Kartanbai said, fussing around Duishen. “Woman, warm up whatever you've got to eat.”

The two men sat down in front of the fire.

“Oh well, if it had to be it had to be,” Kartanbai said with a sigh.

“Why were you so late starting back?”

“The meeting lasted longer than I expected. I have joined the Party, Karake.”

“That's good. But you could have started tomorrow morning. I don't suppose anyone drove you off with a stick, eh?”

"I promised the children I'd be back today," Duishen said. "They're coming to school tomorrow morning."

"What a fool!" Kartanbai started up angrily. "Just listen to him, old woman, he risked his life to keep a promise to those brats! How do you like that! And what if you didn't come through alive, what then? What kind of nonsense are you talking, you dunderhead?"

"It's my duty, my job, Karake. I'm sorry about the horse. I always went on foot, I should have done so this time, too, but no, I had to borrow your horse, only to feed it to the wolves..."

"Never mind that. To hell with the old nag. She was sacrificed for your life, leave it at that" the old man said fiercely. "I've been a horseless peasant all my life, so I'll manage, don't worry. If Soviet power stands firm, I'll get myself another one."

"Those are true words," Saikal said in a voice heavy with tears. "We'll get ourselves another one.... Here, son, eat this while it's nice and hot."

They fell silent.

"I can't make you out, Duishen," Kartanbai said pensively raking the fire. "You're not a stupid person, I'd sooner call you brainy. What for do you take all that trouble with the school, with those silly kids? Is there no better job for you? Why, if you went to work for some one as a shepherd, you'd live in warmth and plenty..."

"I know you wish me well, Karake. But if those silly kids grow up to think as you do that we've no use for schools, for education, the Soviet state won't get very far. You do want it to stand firm, to last, don't you? And that's why I don't mind taking all that trouble, Karake. If only I could teach better, I'd want nothing more. You know that Lenin said..."

"Listen to me a minute," Kartanbai broke in, thought for a moment, and then went on: "You're grieving so. But tears won't bring Lenin back, you know. Alas, there's no power on earth that could. D'you think others don't mourn him like you do? Right here under my ribs my heart is smoldering, and the smoke is bitter. I honestly don't know how this will agree with your politics but I pray for Lenin five times a day, even though he belonged to a different faith. Sometimes I think, Duishen, that you and I needn't weep all those tears. That's how I see it in my own way. Lenin has remained in people's hearts, in the people itself, and this will be handed down from father to son, it's in the blood..."

"Thank you, Karake, for these words. Thank you. Your thinking is right. Lenin has left us, but we'll model our life on him."

Listening to their conversation I seemed to be slowly coming back from somewhere far away. At first it was like a dream. I could not make myself believe that Duishen was really back, safe and sound. And then a hot wave of joy, as overwhelming and irresistible as a spring flood, gushed into my released heart, and I sobbed. Perhaps no one had ever experienced such joy before. In those minutes nothing existed: neither the mud hut I was in, nor the snowstorm raging outside, nor the wolf pack tearing Kartanbai's only horse to pieces. Nothing at all! With my heart, my mind, my entire being I felt a happiness that was extraordinary, infinite, and as immeasurable as light. I pulled the blanket over my head and pressed my hands to my mouth so no one should hear my sobs. But Duishen did.

“Who's that weeping behind the stove?” he asked.

“It's only Altynai, she's had a scare, that's why she's crying,” Saikal told him.

“Is Altynai here?” Duishen sprang up and hurried to me. He kneeled beside me and, touching me on the shoulder, said: “What's the matter, Altynai? Why are you crying?”

I turned away to the wall, and wept with more abandon than before.

“Don't, dearest. What has frightened you so? You're a big girl, you mustn't cry...Come, look at me...”

I hugged him tight, buried my hot, tear-stained face in his shoulder, and sobbed uncontrollably. I was feverish with joy, I was helpless against it.

“Her heart has shifted, I'm afraid,” Kartanbai said anxiously, and got up from the rug. “Come on, old woman, whisper a charm, and be quick about it.”

They all began to fuss around me. Saikal whispered magic words, sprinkled my face with cold and hot water, and mingled her tears with mine.

Ah, if they had only known that my heart had “shifted” because of happiness so great that it could not be put into words.

Duishen sat by my bedside, gently stroking my hot forehead with his cool hand until I calmed down and fell asleep.

Winter moved away to the other side of the mountain pass. Spring was already driving in her blue flocks. Streams of warm air flowed up the mountains from the north, swollen with melted snow. They carried upward springtime fragrance of the earth, the smell of fresh milk. Snowdrifts sagged, the ice in the mountains broke, began to tinkle and then, joining as they ran, they came down in strong, rapid rivers, destroying in their path and filling the washed-out gullies with their lusty song.

This was perhaps the first spring of my maidenhood. At least, it seemed more beautiful to me than any spring I had ever known. From the top of the hill you looked down upon a lovely, springtime world. It seemed to be flying down the slopes with arms outspread faster and faster, unable to stop, down into the sunlit steppe, shimmering mysteriously through a gossamer veil of silver. Somewhere, miles away, you glimpsed the blue of melting lakes, somewhere, miles away, you heard the neighing of horses, you saw cranes flying across the sky, carrying the white clouds on their wings. Where had they come from, and where were they calling you to with cries so nostalgic, so insistent?

With the coming of spring life became more fun. We invented new games to play we laughed for sheer joy of living, and ran all the way home from school shouting to one another. My aunt resented my having fun, and never missed a chance to scold me.

“You've no call to gambol so, you fool. It doesn't seem to worry you that you're an old maid. Other girls of your age have long been married; they've brought more relatives into their families, and you... Some pastime, going to school! Never mind, I'll fix you yet...”

Truth to tell, I didn't take my aunt's threats too seriously. I was used to her abusing me. Besides, calling me an old maid simply wasn't fair. I had grown taller that spring, that's all.

"You're still a tousled child," Duishen would say to me, laughing. "And your hair's ginger too, I think."

I did not mind this in the least "I know my hair's tousled, but it's not really ginger," I'd say to myself. "I won't look like this when I've grown a little older and become a real bride. My aunt will see how beautiful I can be. Duishen says my eyes shine like stars and that I've an open face."

One day, coming from school, I found two strange horses tethered in our yard. Judging by the saddles and harness, the riders came from the mountains. Mountain people sometimes dropped in to see my uncle and aunt on their way to the flourmill or coming back from market.

From the doorway I heard my aunt give a simpering laugh, and it jarred on me.

"Cheer up, nephew dear, it won't break you," I heard her say. "But once you've got the little dove in your hands, you won't be able to thank me enough."

Her words were greeted with guffaws and shouts of approval, but the moment I walked in they fell silent. A fat, stocky man with a red, beefy face was squatting on the felt rug before a spread tablecloth. He looked at me obliquely from under his red-fox hat, pulled down low over his sweating forehead, cleared his throat and dropped his eyes.

"Oh you're back, daughter dear, come in, sweet child," my aunt welcomed me with a smile of sham affection.

Uncle was squatting on the edge of the felt rug with another man I did not know. They were playing cards, drinking liquor and eating *beshbarmak*. They were both drunk, and when they slapped down the cards their heads nodded stupidly.

Our cat stole up to the tablecloth, but the red-faced man struck her so hard on the head with his knuckles that she streaked away with an anguished cry, and hid in the farthest corner. Poor pussy, he had hurt her so! I wanted to escape, but I didn't know how to do it. My aunt came to my rescue,

"Daughter dear, dinner's in the pot, go and have some before it gets cold," she said to me.

I was glad to go, but my aunt's strange manner worried me and put me on my guard.

A couple of hours later, the two men got into their saddles and rode away into the mountains. My aunt at once began to swear at me in her old way and I felt easier in my mind. "She was drunk, that's why she was so loving." I decided.

A few days after this, grandmother Saikal came to see my aunt. I was out in the yard, but I heard the old woman say:

"Are you in your right mind? You're wrecking her life!"

They argued hotly about something, both shouting at once, and then Saikal came out of the house, looking furious. She glanced at me with both anger and pity, and went away without saying a word to me. That glance of hers disturbed me. In what way have I displeased her, why that look?

When I came to school the following morning, I saw at once that Duishen was unhappy and worried, though he tried to conceal his mood from us. And another thing I noticed was that he avoided looking at me. After lessons, when we all poured out of doors in a crowd, Duishen called me back.

"Wait, Altynai," he slid, looking at me earnestly and placing his hand on my shoulder. "Don't go home. Do you understand why, Altynai?"

My blood ran cold. It only dawned on me then what my aunt wanted to do to me.

"I'll give them your answer myself," Duishen said. "You'll stay with us for the time being. And keep close by me."

I must have looked as frightened as I felt. Duishen lifted my chin with gentle fingers and, looking straight into my eyes, smiled his usual smile.

"Don't be scared, Altynai," he said, laughing. "When I'm with you, you needn't fear anything. Just carry on as you've been doing, do your lessons, come to school, and forget about everything else. I know what a coward you are... Yes, I've been wanting to tell you," he laughed again, remembering something funny, and said: "D'you know where Karake went that morning while the rest of us were still asleep? Who d'you think he went to fetch? A witch doctor! Jainak's old woman. When he came back with her, I asked him: 'What have you brought her for?' And he said: 'Let her do a bit of magic. Altynai's heart has shifted from fright.' I told him: 'throw her out of the house, she'll demand a sheep at the very least. And we're not that rich. We can't offer her a horse either, because we've given it to the wolves!'

You were still asleep. And so I got rid of her. Karake wouldn't speak to me for a week after that, I'd made him lose face, he said. They're very good people though, Saikal and Kartanbai, you rarely meet kinder ones. All right, let's go home now, Altynai, come along."

I tried to be brave for Duishen's sake, but I was terrified that my aunt would come and take me away by sheer force. And then they'd do whatever they pleased with me, and no one in the village could stop them. I stayed awake all night, waiting for the storm to break.

Duishen, of course, knew how I felt. And perhaps it was to distract me that next day he brought two saplings to school. After lessons, he took me by the hand and led me to the back of the school.

"You and I have a job to do, Altynai," he said with an air of mystery. "I've brought these young poplars for you. We're going to plant them, together. As they grow and gain strength, you, too, will grow up into a splendid woman. You have a good heart and an inquisitive mind. You'll become a scholar, I'm convinced it will be so; you'll see, you're destined to be a scholar. These saplings are like you, they're so young and slender Let's plant them with our own hands, Altynai. And may you find happiness in learning, my lovely shining star..."

The saplings were my height; they were slender young trees with bluish trunks. Just as we finished planting them, a puff of wind came from the mountains and touched the tiny leaves for the first time, breathing life into them. The leaves quivered, and the poplars swayed...

“Look how nice!” Duishen said happily, stepping back. “And now we'll dig a small ditch from that spring over there. They'll grow into handsome trees, you'll see! They'll be standing here, on this hill, side by side like two brothers. And they'll always be in sight to gladden the hearts of good people. Life will be different then, too, Altynai. The best is still ahead...”

Even now, words fail me to express how moved I was by Duishen's goodness. I just stood and gazed at him. I gazed with new eyes, enraptured by so much noble beauty in his face, such tenderness and kindness in his eyes, I stared as if I had not known how strong and clever his hands could be, how clear his bright smile that warmed the heart. Surging in my breast in a hot wave was a new and strange feeling from a realm of emotions, which had so far been closed to me. Inwardly I strained towards him, to tell him: “Teacher, thank you for being what you are... I want to embrace you and kiss you!” But I did not have the courage; I was ashamed to say those words out loud. Maybe I ought to have said them...

As we stood on that hill, rising amid the newly green plains at the foot of the mountains, the sky above us was a clear blue, and each dreamed his own dream. The threat overhanging me was farthest from my thoughts. I gave no thought to the morrow; I did not wonder why my aunt made no effort to find me, though I had not been home for two days. Vaguely I hoped that they had forgotten all about me, or had perhaps decided to leave me alone. These thoughts did trouble Duishen, though.

“Don't worry too much, Altynai, we'll find a way out” he said on the way back to the village. “I'm going to the regional center the day after tomorrow, I'll talk about you there. Maybe I'll get them to send you to town, to school. Would you like to go?”

“I'll do whatever you say, teacher.”

Although I had not the slightest notion of what a town was, Duishen's wish to send me there was enough to start me dreaming of life in town. I could think of nothing else now. One minute it would appear too strange and frightening, and the next I'd be dying to go.

The next day at school I daydreamed through the lessons: who would I stay with in town, how would I live there? If someone would give me a home, I'd do everything I was told to do-chop firewood, fetch water, wash clothes, everything. The sudden thudding of hoof-beats outside made me start. The horses were coming so fast, they would surely trample our school underfoot. Startled, we all sat up, listening apprehensively.

“Carry on with our work, pay no attention,” Duishen said quickly.

The door flew open, banging back against the wall, and on the threshold stood my aunt. There was a malignant, gloating expression on her sneering face. Duishen went up to the door.

“What brings you here?” he asked her. “Nothing that's any concern of yours. I'm getting my daughter married off. Come here, you slut!” She made a rush towards me, but Duishen barred the way.

“We've only school children here, there's no one old enough for marriage,” he said with deliberate calm.

“We'll see about that. Hey, men, grab the little bitch, take her outside.”

She beckoned to one of the riders; it was the man in the red-fox hat. The other two men also dismounted. They were armed with heavy sticks.

Duishen stood where he was.

"You mangy, homeless cur, d'you think you can order our girls about? Out of my way, you!" snarled the beefy-faced man, advancing on Duishen like a charging bear.

"You've no right to break in, this is a school" Duishen said, holding fast on to the door jambs.

"What did I tell you? He's been whoring with the little bitch free of charge all this time," shrieked my aunt. "I spit on your school!" the red-faced man bellowed turning purple, and taking a swing with his whip.

Duishen was the quicker. He kicked the man in the belly, and he went down, groaning. In a flash, the other two riders pounced on our teacher. The children clung to me with loud cries. I rushed into the melee with the youngsters holding fast to my skirt.

"Let the teacher go! Don't hurt him! Here I am, take me, but don't hurt the teacher!" I cried.

Duishen turned round. He was streaming blood, and his face was frightening in its fury. He picked up a piece of the smashed door and swung it, shouting:

"Run, children, run home, Run, Altynai!" His shout rose to a scream, as they broke his arm. Holding it up with his other hand, Duishen backed away and the two men, roaring like mad bulls, attacked the now defenseless teacher.

"Hit him! Hit him! On the head! hit to kill!"

My aunt and the red-faced brute seized me. They looped my plait round my neck and pulled me outside. I tried to jerk free with all the strength I had in my body, and in that second I saw my schoolmates huddled together, paralyzed with fear their mouths open to scream, and Duishen slumped against the wall, spattered with his blood.

"Teacher!"

But Duishen could not help me. He could hardly stand. He swayed drunkenly as they mined blows on him. He tried to raise his lolling head, but they hit him again and again. I was thrown on the ground, and my hands were tied and then Duishen collapsed.

"Teacher!"

My mouth was stopped, and I was flung across a saddle.

The red-faced one had already mounted, and now he crushed me with his hands and his body. The other two men also leapt into their saddles. My aunt ran beside me, cursing me and hitting me on the head.

“You've been asking for this! I'm rid of you now! Its the end of your precious teacher, too!”

But it was not the end of him. Suddenly, I heard his desperate cry: “Altynai!”

Hanging head down from the horse, I turned to look with difficulty. Duishen was running after us. Beaten almost to a pulp, with blood all over him, he was running, and in his hand there was a large stone. Behind him came the whole class, sobbing and screaming.

“Stop, you brutes! Stop! Let her go! Altynai!” Duishen shouted.

The riders stopped, and the two men who had manhandled Duishen, rode back towards him. Clutching the sleeve of his broken arm with his teeth Duishen took aim and threw the stone. He missed. And then the two struck him with their sticks, and he fell. In the split second before I fainted I saw the children running to their teacher's prostrate body and stopping in fright.

I don't know how and where they took me. I came to in a strange yurt. Early stars, serene and untroubled, peeped into the opening at the top. I could hear a river somewhere close by and the voices of shepherds. A grim-looking woman, withered and bent like a snag, sat in front of the Mack hearth. Her face was as dark as earth. I turned away and saw...Oh, how I wished I could kill him with a look!

“Hey, black one, wake her up,” said the red-faced brute.

The black woman came close, gripped my shoulder with a hard, calloused hand, and shook.

“Make her see reason. If she won't never mind, I'm not going to waste words on her”

He left the yurt. The black woman squatted down again and did not utter a sound. Was she dumb, perhaps? Her eyes, dead as cold ashes, stared dully, expressing nothing. There are dogs like that, beaten into submission as pups. Their cruel masters hit them on the head with anything handy, and gradually the dogs grow used to it, but a dumbness so hopeless, so vacuous comes into their eyes that looking into them makes you shudder. I looked into the dead eyes of the black woman and it seemed to me that I was no longer alive, that I was already dead and buried. I'd have believed it if it hadn't been for the noise of the river. The water rushed over the rapids, splashing and roaring. It was free...

Damn your black soul forever and ever, my cursed aunt! May you drown in my tears and my blood! That night, I was raped. I was only fifteen. Younger than my seducer's daughters.

On my third night there, I made up my mind to escape. I'd brave the hazards of the road, I'd risk being caught, but I'd fight while I had a breath in my body like my teacher, Duishen.

Noiselessly, I crept across the yurt to the opening. In the dark I groped for the flap, but found it secured with a horsehair lasso. It was hopeless trying to undo the intricate knots without a light. I then tried to raise the side of the yurt and crawl out. I struggled in vain: It was secured on the outside with the same strong lassos to stakes driven into the ground.

My only chance was to find some sharp object and cut the rope on the door-flap. I groped about in the dark, but all I found was a small wooden stake. In desperation, I started digging a hole under the sidewall with it. It was a hopeless task, of course, but I was past reasoning. One thought alone hammered in my brain--to get out of there or die, anything not to hear his wheezing and his snores

again, anything not to remain a captive here, to die in freedom if die I must, to die fighting, but never submit.

I was a *tokol*--a concubine. Oh, how I hate that word! Who, in what rotten times had invented it? What can be more humiliating than being a second wife, a slave in body and soul? Rise from your graves, you poor women! Ghosts of all those raped, sullied women, deprived of human dignity, rise! Rise, martyrs, and make the old, hideously dark world quake! It is I who am calling you, I, the last of you, I who have suffered this fate and defied it!

That night I did not know that I should be saying this one-day. In a frenzy of despair, I scraped and scraped at the ground. The soil was rocky and would not yield. I scratched with my torn, bleeding nails. By the time I had dug a hole deep enough to push an arm through, day broke. Dogs began to bark, people woke up. A herd of horses thudded past to the river, and then came a flock of sleepy, snorting sheep. After that someone began to untie the lassos securing the yurt on the outside, and then proceeded to remove the felts. It was the silent black woman.

That meant they were getting ready to move. I suddenly remembered hearing snatches of conversation the day before: they were going to start this morning, move to the pass to begin with, and then go into the heart of the mountains, beyond the pass, for the rest of the summer. My plight seemed more hopeless still--escaping from there would be a hundred times more difficult.

I did not even bother to move away from the hole I had dug. What was the use? The black woman noticed the hole and the heap of earth beside it and said nothing, mutely going on with what she was doing. There was complete indifference to everything in her entire behavior as if nothing in the world could rouse any response in her. She did not even wake her husband; she dared not ask him to help with the packing. He lay snoring like a gear under a mountain of blankets and fur coats.

All the felts had been rolled up, the yurt was denuded, and I sat in it as in a cage, watching people on the other side of the river loading their bullocks and horses. I saw three men on horseback ride up to them and after speaking, start towards our yurt. At first I thought they were coming to get everyone together for the move, but then I looked harder and gasped. One was Duishen, and the other two wore militia caps and had red shoulder straps on their army coats.

I was so stunned and overwhelmed; I could not make a sound. My teacher was alive! What joy! But in my soul there was a black, gaping void: I was finished, soiled.

Duishen's head was bandaged and he had his arm in a sling. He jumped down to the ground, rushed into the yurt, and jerked the blankets off the red-faced snoring brute.

"Get up!" he shouted.

The man raised his head, rubbed his eyes, and made a lunge at Duishen, but shrank back at once on seeing the two revolvers leveled at him by the militiamen. Duishen grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, shook him, and brought his face close to his own with a savage jerk.

"Bloody swine," he hissed through bloodless lips. "You'll go where you belong now! Come on."

The man docilely moved forward, but Duishen dug his fingers into his fat shoulder, swung him round and said in a breaking voice, glaring hard at him:

“You think she's just a broken blade of grass you've tramped on? You think you've ruined her? No bloody fear, you haven't. Your day is gone, it's her day now, and this'll be the end of you!”

The red-faced man was allowed to put on his boots, after that his hands were tied and he was hauled up on a horse. One of the militiamen led the horse by the bridle, the other rode behind. I rode Duishen's horse, and he walked beside me.

When we started off, a scream so wild it was not quite human rose behind us. It was the black woman running after us and screaming. Madly, she leapt at her husband and knocked his hat off with a stone.

“Take this for the blood you've sucked, viper! Take this for my black days, viper! I won't let you off alive!” she-yelled at the top of her voice.

Perhaps she had never lifted her head in all the years of her married life. And now, all her accumulated bitterness, all her pent-up resentment broke through. Her piercing cries echoed in the narrow, rock-faced gorge. She jumped at her husband, who cowered in fear in his saddle; she threw manure, stones and lumps of mud at him, and screamed out curses.

“May no grass grow where you set foot! May your body lie unburied in the field, and may the ravens pick your eyes out! May I never see your face again! Begone, you fiend, begone, begone, begone!”

She paused for breath and then, shrieking, dashed away, her hair streaming out behind her in the wind.

It was like a nightmare. I was dizzy, crushed and miserable. Duishen was leading my horse by the bridle. He walked in silence, his bandaged head hung low.

At last we left the fateful gorge behind us. The militiamen had gone far ahead. And now Duishen halted the horse and looked at me for the first time, with torment in his eyes.

“I failed you, I have not kept you safe, Altynai. Forgive me,” he said. He took my hand and pressed it to his cheek. “But even if you forgive me, I shall never forgive myself.”

I hugged my horse's neck, and sobbed. Duishen stood beside me, stroking my hair without a word, letting me have my cry.

“Come, Altynai, let us go,” he said at last. I have something to tell you. I've been to the regional center the day before yesterday. You're going to town, to school,”

When we came to a clear, noisy little river, Duishen stopped.

“Bathe your face, Altynai,” he said, taking a cake of soap from his pocket. “Here you are, use this. If you like I'll take the horse to graze, and then you can take off your clothes and bathe in the river. Forget everything you've been through, never think of it again. Do take a swim, Altynai, it will make you feel much better. All right?”

I nodded. And when Duishen had walked away, I took off my clothes and gingerly stepped into the water. White, blue, green and red pebbles eyed me from the bottom. The blue water swirled, babbling round my ankles. I scooped up some water with my hands and splashed it on my breasts. It trickled

down my body and I laughed for the first time in the last three days. Oh it was such joy to laugh! I splashed water on my body again and again, and then plunged in. The current swiftly carried me to the shallows; I got to my feet and plunged into the foaming stream again.

“Oh river, carry away the filth and ugliness of those three days! Oh water, make me as clean as you are!” I whispered.

Why can't we leave our footprints forever in places filled with precious memories for us? If I could find the path Duishen and I had followed coming down from the mountains, I would prostrate myself on the ground and kiss my teacher's footprints. That path means more to me than all the roads in the world. I bless that day, that path, that road I traveled back to life, to new faith in myself, to fresh hope, to light... I thank the sun that shone that day, I thank the earth...

Two days later, Duishen took me to the railway station.

After what had happened to me, I did not want to remain in the village any longer. My new life had to be begun in a new place. Saikal and Kartanbai got me ready for the journey; they fussed over me, pressed bundles of food on me, and wept like children. Many of our neighbors came in to say good-bye, the quarrelsome Satymkul among them. People generally approved my decision to leave at once.

“God be with you, child,” Satymkul said to me. “May your road be clear! Do not be afraid, just live as the teacher has taught you and you'll be all right. Say what you may, but we, too have begun to understand some things better.”

Our schoolchildren ran after the cart for a long time and waved...

There were several other youngsters going with me to the children's home in Tashkent. A Russian woman in a leather jacket was waiting for us at the railway station.

How often, in later life, the train took me past that small, poplar-shaded station in the mountains! I think I left half my heart there forever!

There was something so sad, so heart breaking in the wavering lilac light of that spring evening, as if the twilight itself knew that this was our good-bye. Duishen tried not to show how distressed he was, how heavy his heart, but I knew, because the same pain rose to my throat in a hot lump. He stood looking close into my eyes, his hands caressing my hair, my face, and even the buttons on my coat.

“If I could, I'd never let you go, Altynai, but I have no right to stand in your way. You've got to study. And I'm not very literate, you know. You must go; it's for the best... Maybe you'll make a real teacher one day, and then you'll remember our school, and laugh perhaps. Let it be so, let it be so...”

From afar came the whistle of the train, calling a resounding echo in the gorge, and then we saw its lights approaching. There was a stir among the waiting crowd.

“In another minute you'll be gone,” Duishen said with a quiver in his voice. “Be happy. Altynai. And study hard, study, that's the main thing.”

I could not speak, tears choked me.

“Don't cry, Altynai,” he said, wiping my eyes. And suddenly remembering, he said: “Those poplars you and I have planted I'll tend with my own hands. And when you come back, an important person, you'll see how beautiful they have grown to be.”

The train rolled in. Clanging, the cars came to a standstill.

“Well, we must say good-bye,” Duishen took me in his arms and kissed me hard on the forehead.  
“Good luck, good-bye, my dearest...Don't be afraid, be brave always...”

I jumped on to the step and looked over my shoulder. Never will I forget that moment: Duishen, his arm in a sling, was looking at me with swimming eyes, he strained forward as if he wanted to touch me again, but at that moment the train started.

“Good-bye, Altynai! Good-bye, my shining light!” he called out.

“Good-bye, teacher! Good-bye, my dear, dear teacher!”

Duishen ran beside the train, he fell behind only to make a sudden dash forward again, and shouted:  
“Altynai!”

There was such urgency in his shout as if he suddenly realized he had not told me something terribly important he had wanted to tell me all along, but now it was too late, and he knew it. Till this day I can hear that shout, rising from the very heart, the very depths of his soul.

The train dived into a tunnel, came out onto a stretch of straight road and, gathering speed, carried me through the Kazakh plains to a new life...

Good-bye, teacher, good-bye, my first school, my childhood, good-bye, my first love...

I lived in a big town of which Duishen dreamed, I went to a big school with large windows, which he told us about. After finishing high school, I was sent to Moscow to enroll in an institute.

The difficulties that confronted me in those long years of study, the times I knew despair because it seemed to me I'd never master all that knowledge! I did not give in, though; I dared not, because of what I owed my first teacher. The thought of him gave me staying power when things were hardest. What others grasped 'at once took me an enormous effort to master, as I'd had to start from scratch.

While still in high school, I wrote Duishen a letter, telling him I loved him and was waiting for him. He did not answer. And I never wrote again. I think he denied himself and me happiness so I should not leave my studies. Perhaps he was right... Or was there another reason? The doubts, the agony I suffered in those days!

My first degree was conferred on me in Moscow, where I presented my thesis. It was a big, important victory for me. In those busy years I never once managed a visit home. And then the war broke out. Late that autumn, on my way to Frunze, I got off the train at the small railway station where Duishen and I parted that day, long ago. Luck was with me: there was a buggy going to our village.

My dear home that I only came back to in the grim days of war! Gladness filled me at the sight of my transformed country with its new villages; newly cultivated fields, new roads and bridges, but the shadow of war marred my joy.

I felt a thrill of excitement as we approached the village. From afar I tried to make out the new streets, houses and orchards, and then I turned my gaze on the hill where our school once stood. Standing side by side were two tall poplars. My breath caught at the sight of them. They were swaying gently in the breeze. And then, for the first time in my life, I called him by name, the man I had always addressed as teacher.

“Duishen,” I whispered. “Thank you for everything you have done for me, Duishen! So you've been thinking about me...,, you kept your promise...How like you, Duishen.

Tears started to my eyes.

“What's wrong?” the young driver asked anxiously.

“Nothing really. D'you know anyone here?”

“Sure. I know everyone.”

“D'you know Duishen? He once taught school here.”

“Duishen? But he's joined up. I drove him to the enlistment office myself and in this very buggy!”

I told him to drive on and leave me there. What should I do? Go from house to house looking for people who remember me? No, I could not do that at a time like this. And Duishen was away, fighting. And another thing: I had sworn I'd never' set foot in my aunt and uncle's place. One can forgive many things, but I don't think anyone could forgive a monstrous crime like theirs. I didn't even want them to know that I had been back. And so I turned off the road and went up the hill, to the poplars.

Ah my poplars, my beautiful poplars! So much water has flowed under the bridges since you were young slender saplings! All that the man who planted and tended you dreamed of, all he predicted has come true! Then why do you murmur so sadly, so mournfully? Are you lamenting the passage of summer, are you complaining because the cold winds are tearing off your leaves? Or are your trunks moaning with the pain and grief of our people?

Yes, there will be winter, there will be cold, there will be snowstorms, but then there will be spring again...

I remained there for a long time, listening to the rustle of the yellowing leaves. The ditch at the foot of the trees had recently been cleaned out for the ground still retained the deep and fresh cuts made by the hoe. There was a right ripple on the clear water filling the ditch to the brim, : and on it floated the yellow leaves shed by the poplars.

From where I stood I was able to make out the roof of the new school building. Of our old school on the hill no trace remained...

I walked back to the road and got a lift to the railway station in the first buggy I saw.

There was war and then came victory. Children proudly carried their books to school in their father's map cases, men came back to relieve the women of men's work, and war widows, with no more tears left, reconciled themselves to their loneliness. There were also those who still waited for their loved ones to come back.

And I, too, knew nothing about Duishen. People who came to town from Kurkureu told me he was listed among the missing, the village Soviet had received a notification to this effect, they said.

"Maybe he was killed," they said. "A long time has passed, and still there's no news of him."

So my teacher was not coming back. That memorable day when we said good-bye was to be our last...

I never knew there was so much grief and sorrow stored away in my heart, until I turned up these pages of my past.

In the late autumn of 1946, I was sent on a scientific mission to the university in Tomsk.

It was my first journey across Siberia. In its late autumn guise the country looked grim and forbidding. The age-old forests flashed past in a dark, somber wall. There were clearings dotted with the black roofs of cottages, thin white smoke trailing from the chimneys. The first snow was settling on the cold, desolate fields. Tousled crows were circling over them. The sky was overcast most of the time.

But I never had a dull moment with my train companions. One man, a war invalid on crutches, had a store of funny army stories and jokes to amuse us. His supply of apparently artless and harmless, but profoundly true stories, never seemed to run dry. Everyone on the train loved the man. We were past Novosibirsk when the train stopped for a minute at a flag-station. I stood looking out of the window; laughing at the joke he had just told us. And now we were off, we were passing the switch-mans solitary little cottage when I received a shock that made me recoil from the window and the next instant press my face to the pane. It was Duishen, he was there! He stood outside the hut holding up a small flag. I think I went crazy.

"Stop!" I screamed at the top of my voice, rushing to the end of the car with no idea of what I was going to do until I saw the emergency brake. I pulled it.

The cars bumped into one another, the engine braked abruptly and as abruptly backed. Suitcases came clattering down from the racks, cups and glasses rolled off the tables, women screamed, children howled, and someone yelled: "A man's been run over!"

I was already on the steps. Blindly. I jumped not caring where, and as blindly I ran back to the switchman's hut, to Duishen. Behind me I heard the whistles of the train guards. Passengers had also jumped down and were running after me.

I flew the length of the train. Duishen was running towards me.

"Duishen! Teacher!" I cried.

The man stopped and started at me in dismay. It was Duishen, of course it was, the face and the eyes were his, he was simply a little older and wore a moustache.

"What's the trouble, sister?" he asked me kindly in Kazakh. "You must have mistaken me for someone. I'm the switch-man, my name's Beineu."

"Beinue?"

I clenched my teeth not to scream from disappointment, hurt and shame. What have I done! I covered my face with my hands and dropped my head. Oh, why did not the earth swallow me up! I knew I had to beg the switchman's pardon and the passengers' too for giving them such a fright, but I just stood there in rigid silence. My fellow-passengers were also strangely silent. I expected them to be angry with me, but no one said anything. And in that eerie silence, a woman gave a short sob.

"Poor soul, she must have mistaken him for her husband or her brother!"

The crowd came alive.

"What a thing to happen!" someone said in a deep voice.

"But what didn't happen in the war, what didn't we go through!" a woman's quivering voice replied.

The switchman drew my hands away from my face, and said:

"Let us go. I'll take you to your coach it's getting cold."

He took my arm. An officer I did not know supported me on the other side.

"Let us go, comrade. We do understand," he said.

People made way for me, and I was led like a chief mourner at a funeral. We walked slowly on, with the rest following behind us. The train passengers, who were standing about, silently joined the procession. Someone draped a woolen shawl about my shoulders. The man on crutches kept close behind me. Now and then he'd catch up with us and take an anxious look at my face. This great joker, this cheerful, kind and courageous man, walked with bared head for some reason, and I think he was crying. I, too, was crying. And in that slow, measured march past the train, in the whistling and humming of the telegraph wires, I heard the sounds of a funeral march. "No, I'll never see him again"

When we reached my coach, the head conductor stopped me. He was loud-voiced and angry, he shook his finger at me and said something about criminal responsibility and lines. I did not say anything in self-defense. Nothing mattered to me. He thrust a statement at me, and insisted that I sign it there and then, but there was no strength in my fingers to hold the pencil he gave me.

And then my fellow traveler on crutches snatched the paper out of the man's hands, and advancing on him threateningly shouted into his face:

"Leave her alone! I'll sign it, it's I who pulled the emergency brake, and I'll take the responsibility!"

The train hurried to make up for lost time across Siberia, through old Russian lands. Someone was playing a guitar, and in the night it had a melancholy ring. This plaintive song of Russian widows I carried away in my heart--a reminder of my tragic encounter with the aftermath of the war.

Years went by. The past receded and the future with its big and small cares called insistently. I married late in life. My husband is a good man. We have children, we are a happy family. I am now a doctor of philosophy. I have to do a lot of traveling. I've been to many countries... But I never went back to Kurkureu again. I had my reasons, of course, many reasons, but I'm not making excuses for myself. Severing all ties with my home is bad, it's unforgivable. But there it is. I did not forget the past, no, I couldn't have forgotten it, I sort of drifted away from it.

The thought of those small springs in the mountains comes to mind. A new road is made, the path leading to the spring is forgotten, wayfarers go there for a drink of water more and more rarely, and gradually it becomes overgrown with mint and brambles. And soon you wouldn't notice there was a spring there at all. Only once in a long while, on a very hot day, someone will remember its there, turn off the main road and go looking for it to quench his thirst. He'll come to that neglected spring, push the branches aside and catch his breath, astonished at the amazing clearness of the deep, calm water, so long undisturbed. And in it he will see himself, the sun, the sky, and the mountains, and he will say to himself that it's a sin not to know such a lovely spot, and that he must tell his friends about it. But he'll forget until next time.

This happens in life too, sometimes. But perhaps that's the way it should be.

My recent visit to Kurkureu has reminded me of such a spring.

It puzzled you, of course, why I left so suddenly. Couldn't I have told people all this when I was there, you'll ask me. No I couldn't. I was so upset, so ashamed of myself, that's why I decided to leave at once. I knew I could not face Duishen, I could not look him straight in the eyes. I had to pull myself together, think everything over calmly, reflect on what I'd like to say not to our villagers alone, but to many other people besides.

I felt embarrassed and ashamed for another reason too: it's not I that all that attention should have been lavished on, it's not I who should have had the place of honor at the school opening ceremony. That should have been the privilege of our first teacher, the first Communist in our village, Duishen. Of all the people there he had the greatest right to it. But everything was just the other way about. We were smugly enjoying the banquet, while he, the man of pure gold, had been riding hard to deliver the telegrams of congratulations to us, and after that he hurried off to deliver the rest of the mail.

I've seen such things happen before, this case was not unique. And that is why I am asking of myself: when did we forget how to respect an ordinary man the way Lenin respected him? I'm glad at least that we now speak about such things frankly without hypocrisy. It's very good that in this, at least, we have come so much closer to Lenin.

The young people in Kurkureu don't understand what a wonderful teacher Duishen was. Many of the older people are no longer living. Many of Duishen's pupils were killed in the war. And so it was my duty to tell the young generation about the teacher Duishen. Anyone in my place would have been honor bound to do it. But I never went back to Kurkureu, I had no news of Duishen, and with time his image became for me a precious relic kept in the silence of a museum.

I mean to go back to see my teacher, to stand answer before him. I shall beg him to forgive me.

When I've finished my business in Moscow, I'll go back to Kurkureu and ask them to name the new boarding-school after Duishen. Yes, Duishen, a rank and file member of the collective farm, its postman. I am hoping that you, my fellow Kurkureu, will support me. Please do.

It's now one o'clock in the morning. I am standing on my balcony, looking at the sea of city lights, and thinking that one day soon I'll be back in Kurkureu, I'll see my teacher again, and kiss his gray beard... I open my windows wide. A stream of fresh air comes pouring into the room. In the bluish, paling half-light I pore over the sketches for my new picture. The sketches are many, for I have had to begin at the very beginning again and again. But it's too early to see the picture as a whole. I haven't found the main thing yet. I pace the floor in the silence of the waning night, thinking, thinking, thinking... It happens every time. And every time I realize that my picture remains no more than a vague idea.

Still, I want to talk to you about my as yet unpainted picture. I want to ask your advice. You have already guessed, of course, that it will be dedicated to the first teacher in our village, to our first Communist--old Duishen.

But as yet I'm not sure if I'll be able to convey in colors the complexity of this life of a fighter, the different human destinies and the great range of emotions that played a part in that life. I must not spill this brimming cup, I must carry it safely to you, my contemporaries, but how to do it? I must not simply convey my idea to you; I must make my picture our common creation. But how to do it?

I must paint this picture, and yet I have so many misgivings and doubts. At times, I feel I'm no good at all, but then I think: why then did it please fate to make me an artist? Oh, it's sheer torture! Another time I feel so strong, I could push a mountain over! And then I say to myself: observe, study and select. Paint the poplars of Duishen and Altynai, the poplars you loved so as a child, though you did not know their story. Paint a barefooted, sun burnt boy sitting on the highest branch he could climb, gazing spellbound into the mysterious distance.

Or, perhaps, call your picture The First Teacher and depict, say, this moment: Duishen carrying his school children across a stream, and a couple of grossly stupid men in red-fox hats riding past on sleek horses, jeering at him.

Or else paint their parting scene at the railway station. Remember Duishen's shout? Well, let your picture be like Duishen's shout that Altynai can hear to this day, let it call a response in every heart.

That is what I tell myself. There are lots of things I tell myself, but not all of them work out... I still don't know what I'll paint. But I do know one thing: I shall not give up.